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Repatriation to Turkey's "Safe Zone" in Northeast Syria

Ankara's Goals and European Concerns

Sinem Adar

Following the US decision to withdraw troops from Northeast Syria and upon separate agreements with the US and Russia, Ankara established what it calls a safe zone in the area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. Even if spanning a smaller territory than envisaged, Turkey aims with its safe zone to impede Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria, on the one hand, and to return refugees who have increasingly become a domestic policy challenge for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP thereafter), on the other hand. Turkey's plan for repatriation signals that its interests align with European interests in refugee return. Given concerns about the safety of refugees, voluntary nature of return, and Ankara's attempts at demographic engineering, Europeans should not support a Turkey-led repatriation to Syria without conditions.

Since the eruption of the Syrian war in 2011, Turkey has been adamantly advocating for the establishment of a "safe zone" in Northern Syria. Its motivations have, however, changed over time in line with its political priorities. Between 2011 and 2014, Ankara's main concern in pushing for a safe zone in Northern Syria (including a no-fly zone) was to topple Assad regime, and relatedly, to create a safe haven for its preferred anti-Assad rebels. The proposal remained during this time a matter of disagreement between Turkey and the US. Upon the US decision in 2014 to cooperate with the People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) — an offshoot of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) — in the fight against IS, and later, the involvement of Russia in 2015 in favour of the Assad regime, Turkey's priorities in establishing a safe zone increasingly moved towards impeding a strong YPG/PYD presence in Northern Syria. The aim to curtail YPG/PYD became even more severe as YPG advances between 2014 and 2016 led to the foundation of the so-called self-administration cantons in Afrin, Al-Jazeera, and Kobani (Ayn al-Arab). This together with the collapse of the Peace Process in Turkey and the renewal of the civil war with the PKK in 2015 turned Northern Syria, for Turkey, into a security threat.

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Humanitarian narratives

Despite its shifting motivations in establishing a safe zone, Ankara has been consistent in cloaking its political ambitions under a humanitarian cover. In the early years of the war, Turkey argued that a safe zone in Northern Syria would help settling internally displaced people. Reaching the limits of its institutional capacity to accommodate a high number of Syrian refugees that amounted to around 1.5 million by the end of 2014, Ankara earlier in March 2015 partially closed the Syrian border, moving away from its open-door policy that had been in implementation since the eruption of the war. It also launched a 764-kilometers concrete wall project alongside its 911-kilometers long Syrian border. In the wake of the death of the three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi in the Aegean Sea, then Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoglu criticized the international community in a speech he delivered on September 4 2015 in Ankara at a B20 (an integral part of the G20 process representing the business community) meeting for turning a blind eye to Turkey's earlier calls for the establishment of a safe zone, and asked for cooperation towards humanitarian ends.

Amid the high number of refugees trying to reach Europe in the fall of 2015 via the Aegean Sea and the human catastrophe that ensued, Turkey and Europe agreed on the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016 (preceded by the Joint Action Plan in November 2015), outlining the details of their co-operation over migration control and border security. According to the Statement, Turkey agreed to prevent irregular migration to Europe, and for every Syrian refugee returned from Greece to Turkey, a Syrian refugee in Turkey would be resettled in Europe. In return, the EU agreed to grant visa liberalization for Turkish citizens under a number of preconditions including complying with the EU's data protection and antiterrorism laws; renewing accession talks; new negotiations on the customs union; and financial aid amounting to 3+3 billion euros to address the urgent needs of refugees in the areas of education, health, security, shelter and food supply.

Ankara has since then increasingly continued to play the refugee card towards two ends. The first has been the exclusion of YPG/PYD from the political process in Syria, which has since 2017 been primarily shaped via the Astana talks led by Russia, Iran and Turkey. For instance, then Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım suggested in November 2017 during his visit to London that Turkey could renege on the EU-Turkey Statement if Kurdish forces in Syria were given a role in the UN-sponsored peace talks. Secondly, refugees were also increasingly instrumentalized by Turkey to gain international support for its reconstruction efforts in Northern Syria. Speaking in early September 2019 at a meeting of the AKP's provincial heads, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened to reopen a route for Syrian refugees to enter Europe if the EU did not provide adequate logistical and financial support to restructure the proposed safe zone for refugee return.

Particular features of Turkey's safe zone proposal

Neither conflating humanitarian action with political strategy in establishing a safe zone nor repatriation attempt is unique to Turkey. Both of these practices have in fact been common since the 1990s. Historical examples such as Rwanda and Northern Iraq demonstrate that the establishment of such zones often involved the overriding of states' military and strategic interests over humanitarian goals. There is, however, something particular in Turkey's proposal, especially since its first direct military incursion in 2016 into Northern Syria. Contrary to previous cases elsewhere, Turkey's current efforts do not intend to offer urgent and temporary humanitarian relief to civilians trapped in conflict. For instance, a safe zone was established in Northern Iraq upon a joint initiative by Britain, France, and the US, citing UN Security Council Resolution 688, because Turkey closed its Iraqi border

in 1991 to prevent the entry of Iraqi Kurds fleeing the war. Similarly, the French military, authorized by the UN Security Council Resolution 929, intervened in 1995 to carve out a safe zone to protect the Tutsis and prevent a rapid influx of people into Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Unlike these earlier cases, Turkey's efforts to build a so-called safe zone in Northern Syria are based on the assumption of permanent refugee return from Turkey.

In this respect, Ankara's plan to build in Northern Syria cities and towns with complete infrastructure including hospitals, schools, mosques, homes, other facilities, and even plots of land to be distributed to the returnees gives its repatriation efforts a distinct character. The initial Turkish draft plan for a reconstruction project, which Mr. Erdoğan announced during his visit at the UN General Assembly in September 2019, to settle around one million Syrian refugees in a safe zone with a length of 480 kilometres would cost around 151 billion Turkish liras (24 billion Euros). According to the agreement reached by Turkey and Russia in Sochi on October 22, Ankara now plans to resettle refugees, the exact number of which is unknown, in the 120 km-long strips of land controlled by Turkey and its proxies between the towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad. Article 8 of the agreement envisages Turkey and Russia to jointly launch efforts to facilitate safe and voluntary return of refugees.

Safety, voluntariness and demographic engineering

There is however enough to be worried about a Turkey-led repatriation. Firstly, allegations of human rights violations by Turkish proxies, and potential future conflict between the Turkish army and Kurdish forces cast doubt in the short-term on the security of such a zone under Turkish control. Safety remains a concern in the medium-term as well given that it is unclear at the moment whether the zone will remain under the control of Turkey or fall under that of the Syrian regime. In the case of the latter, existing practices of political suppression by the Assad regime over returnees is perturbing. Thirdly, supposedly voluntary nature of the return is also subject to suspicion. Even though Turkish authorities have expressed their commitment to the voluntary return of the refugees, humanitarian organizations claim that Turkey has been deporting refugees to Syria on illegal grounds.

Today approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees live in Turkey under temporary protection status. Amidst the deepening economic crisis, hostilities within Turkish society against Syrians have been on the rise, forcing the ruling AKP to move away from its earlier policies of hospitality. Not too long after the re-run of the Istanbul municipal elections in 23 June 2019, for instance, Süleyman Soylu, the Minister of Interior, announced that those Syrian refugees with temporary protection status who were registered in other Turkish districts had to leave Istanbul by 30 October back to the provinces in which they were registered, and those without papers were to be transferred to temporary refugee camps in order to be registered. Syrian refugees are reportedly forced to sign declarations of "voluntary" departure and face deportation to Syria under inhumane conditions, including refusal of food. According to the UNHCR statistics, there has been a total of 50,422 self-organized refugee returns to Syria from Turkey during 2016—2018.

In addition to the doubts about safety and voluntariness, Northern Syria's demographic composition is another issue for concern. For Ankara, a safe zone to resettle refugees seems to be synonymous with creating an "ethnic belt" in order to contain a strong YPG/PYD presence at its Syrian border. Even though Turkish authorities and pro-government think tanks argue that Turkey does not have any nation-building ambitions in Northern Syria, existing evidence about the governance practices in Turkey-controlled areas such as Jarablus, Al-Bab and Afrin raise suspicion. Four types of activity seem to dominate Turkey's

governance practices in these areas: i) the formation of an Ankara-aligned political elite composed of Arabs, Turkmens, and anti-PYD Kurdish factions, ii) unequal political representation at the local councils, iii) demographic engineering efforts particularly via settling Arabs and Turkmens, and last, but not least, iv) setting up social and bureaucratic infrastructure, including even issuing ID cards to residents.

These existing practices invoke serious questions, in the case of a Turkey-led repatriation to the area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, about who would return where, and by whom and how the process would be overseen so that at the minimum safety of returnees and voluntariness of the return are ensured. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Iran, Russia, and Turkey stressed in their joint statement issued on 29 October 2019 that refugees would return voluntarily to their original places of residence in Syria. Given its political aspirations for demographic and social engineering, however, to what extent Turkey will keep its promise remains ambiguous.

Challenges and options for the EU

Turkey's pressure on the EU for financial contribution to resettle refugees in a Turkey-controlled safe zone will continue as the recent statements from Ankara demonstrate. Given the changing dynamics on the ground especially after Turkey's October 2019 military assault, Europe should consider leveraging its financial, logistical and diplomatic support to Turkey to ensure that repatriation happens on the basis of rights and protection. This, first and foremost, means, especially for the short term, that EU should not support a Turkey-led refugee return to Syria. Even if the political climate in Turkey but also in Europe appears to be favourable to the idea of refugee return, Northern Syria remains fragile and conflict-ridden, with mid- to long-term perspective being unclear. Moreover, Assad regime seems determined to punish returnees whom it perceives as disloyal or threats to its survival. Under these circumstances, EU should continue investing in strengthening social and economic participation of refugees in Turkey. To ensure an effective and efficient implementation of this goal, local actors such as municipalities and NGOs should be supported especially in areas of education and labour market participation.

Continuing its financial and logistical support for social and economic participation of refugees in Turkey could increase EU's leverage given Ankara's recent warnings to terminate the EU-Turkey Statement due to the current situation in Idlib. It is important that the EU firmly implement political conditionality and remind Turkey that the continuation of the Statement is dependent on Turkey's commitment to the *non-refoulement* principle under international law. To this end, the EU should consider taking an active role in supporting cooperation with UNHCR and human rights organizations in monitoring the deportation allegations against Turkey.

Relatedly, a coordinated European political engagement with Turkey should also continue to prevent repatriation from becoming demographic engineering in the medium-term. This is, however, not an easy task given the diverging interests and understandings of Turkey and the EU about refugee return and reconstruction. The EU should insist on safeguards to ensure that Turkey (and Russia) fulfil their joint commitment to voluntary return to original places of residence. These include involving UNHCR to monitor the safety of people once they have returned, and to ensure that they return to their places of origin.

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